

## **The Chronicle of Higher Education**

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### **More Than 500 Colleges Commit to Participate in New Veterans' Program**

By AUSTIN WRIGHT

Starting this fall, veterans will be able to attend [more than 500](#) private colleges and out-of-state public institutions at a reduced price, thanks to a dollar-for-dollar federal matching program created under last year's GI bill. Monday marked the final day for colleges nationwide to commit to the [Yellow Ribbon Program](#), under which the federal government will match any financial aid that participating colleges provide to veterans above the cost of the most expensive public college in their state.

Under the expanded GI bill, veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan can attend in-state public colleges for free or apply the money toward the cost of an out-of-state or private institution.

As of last Thursday, 573 colleges had reached yellow-ribbon agreements with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Of those, 401 are private, nonprofit institutions; 112 are proprietary institutions; and 60 are public institutions. About one-fifth of all nonprofit, private institutions signed up, compared with about 3 percent of public colleges and 4 percent of for-profits.

Officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs said they expected to see a surge in the number of colleges signing up before Monday's end-of-the-day deadline. A final list of participating colleges should be available June 22.

"They're coming in hot and heavy," said Keith M. Wilson, the department's education-service director. He said the department projects that the number of veterans receiving educational benefits, now at 350,000, will increase 25 percent next year, as the more-attractive aid packages will probably encourage a greater number of veterans to pursue a college or graduate education.

To be eligible for the yellow-ribbon benefits, veterans must have served three years on active duty or at least 30 continuous days before being discharged for service-related injuries since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

#### **Different Approaches**

Many colleges have committed to specific amounts they are willing to contribute, while others have said they will cover the entire cost of attendance for all veterans admitted. The department

reached a total of 1,399 agreements with the 573 yellow-ribbon colleges because many institutions had separate agreements for each of their graduate programs.

At Harvard University, for example, each graduate program decided separately how much money it would contribute and how many veterans it could support. Harvard's law school agreed to cover the full cost of attendance, said Howell E. Jackson, acting dean of the law school, which has about 12 student veterans.

“The vast majority of our aid is need-based,” Mr. Howell said. “But I do personally think that the veterans are a special case.”

Harvard's undergraduate college committed to providing \$3,000 to any qualifying veteran on top of the university's promise to meet the full demonstrated need of any student.

Princeton University, in contrast, has decided not to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program, as the institution did not want to deviate from its mission of providing aid solely on the basis of need, said a university spokeswoman, Emily Aronson. Princeton, like Harvard, provides 100 percent of a student's demonstrated financial need.

### **Unequal Costs**

Because of the Yellow Ribbon Program's design, private colleges in states with relatively low in-state public-college tuition have to make up a larger cost gap than colleges in states with higher in-state tuition. For instance, in Washington, D.C., the cost to attend a local public college is less than \$3,000 per year, while private colleges in Washington have some of the highest tuition rates in the country.

Still, at least three private colleges in Washington have signed up: Georgetown University, George Washington University, and Wesley Theological Seminary. Donald R. Lehman, George Washington's executive vice president for academic affairs, said it did not bother him that the program put his university at an economic disadvantage compared with colleges in states with higher-cost public education.

“We don't really look at it from that particular viewpoint—we look at it as an opportunity to provide service members a world-class education,” said Mr. Lehman, who received GI benefits himself when he was a doctoral student at the university in the 1960s. “That's their merit award for what they did for the country.”

George Washington has committed to providing \$18,000 per year, per veteran. When combined with the federal government's matching \$18,000 and the base benefit already provided through the GI bill, the contribution will allow many veterans to attend the university at no cost. Mr. Lehman said the institution estimates that there are 360 students already attending George Washington who will be eligible next year.

Brian Hawthorne, a student at the university and the Washington director of Student Veterans of America, brought the program to the attention of top administrators last year and got the student government there to pass a resolution of support for the program.

Mr. Hawthorne, who as a medic was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for saving the life of a soldier who had been injured by a roadside bomb in Iraq, doesn't qualify for educational benefits under the program, because he served on active duty for slightly less than the required three years. Still, he said he receives a generous financial-aid package from the university.

"It's important for universities out there to know that veterans are going to be coming to colleges," said Mr. Hawthorne. He added that many veterans have delayed college to wait for the new benefits to kick in.

"I think it's great, and the fact that it's voluntary makes it so it sends a message from the universities that they support veterans."